DIVERGENT OUTCOMES: EXAMINING THE EFFICACY OF SANCTIONS IN ACHIEVING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES IN IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

Iranian sanctions imposed by the United States and other countries have been in place since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which saw the ouster of the United States-backed secular Shah and his replacement with a regime that has blended democratic and theocratic elements into a complex governing structure. The revolution and accompanying events, including the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, marked the beginning of a new phase of US-Iranian relations. In stark contrast to the previous decades of cooperation between the US government and the pre-revolutionary Iranian Shah, relations are now characterized by enmity and antagonism. These tensions have largely been motivated by Iran's nuclear development program and its role as a state sponsor of terrorism as designated by the United States.

US foreign policy objectives oppose two major Iranian activities: (1) its nuclear development program and (2) its role as a regional sponsor of terrorism. Since the revolution, the international community has expressed concern regarding Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.² As I will examine in greater detail in the body of this essay, this fear has played a significant role in determining US policy towards Iran, specifically with regard to sanctions. In addition, of paramount

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² "Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables", 2015. 6.

concern to Western interests has been Iran's pursuit of an expanded sphere of influence in the Middle East through its involvement in regional conflicts. To accomplish this, Iran has provided financial and ideological support for friendly proxy groups and militias throughout the Middle East, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. These patronage relationships play a crucial role in Iran's pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, and have triggered significant conflicts in the region, including between the Iraqi government and the Islamic State and the ongoing Syrian civil war. Iranian patronage significantly shaped other countries' policies towards Tehran and precipitated many of the inflection points in the relationship between Iran and the United States. These include the United States' 1993 designation of Iran as a State Sponsor of Terror and the 2010 comprehensive sanctions imposed by the US on Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps – the first time the US has sanctioned parts of a nation's armed forces.³

In response to these central foreign policy concerns, the United States, between 1979 and 2013, imposed a barrage of sanctions on Iran and led a coalition of international allies to do the same, which resulted in profound economic and diplomatic isolation for Iran. Through these sanctions, Iranian banks were severed from the international financial network, trade with Iranian businesses and individuals was cut off, and investment in Iran's crucial energy sector was effectively stalled.⁴ A European Union oil embargo reduced Iran's oil exports to less than half of its peak of 2.5 million barrels per day, constituting serious damage to the Iranian government's ability to cover expenditures. In addition, Iran experienced inflation of up to 50%, and suffered a 5% contraction in its economy in 2013, demonstrating the far-reaching consequences of the sanctions. These changes did significant damage to the Iranian economy and its international reputation, effectively characterizing Iran as a rogue state and forcing it to become accustomed to economic isolation. Importantly, these sanctions cause significant tolls on the Iranian economy and regime, crippling business and development in Iran and causing multiple domestic challenges for Iran's government.⁵

³ "Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables", 2015. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran Sanctions", 2013. 53.

Due to their damaging effects, one must consider to what degree the sanctions have secured Iranian compliance with regard to the United States' two central foreign policy concerns. Further, as the sanctions on Iran were some of the most far-reaching and debilitating in history, the ultimate results are significant from an international relations perspective. Theoretically, they should provide answers regarding the potential effectiveness and utility of economic sanctions. In addition, the US has diplomatic and security interests in understanding the sanctions' effects given the outsize role that Iran plays in determining the course of events in the Middle East, the world's most tumultuous and strategically important region over recent decades.

The multilateral sanctions on Iran carry a mixed legacy regarding the US's two central foreign policy concerns. First, with regard to Iran's nuclear development program, the 2016 JCPOA effectively secured Western interests by assuaging expressed US concerns over the nuclear development program for the next ten to fifteen years. In short, the sanctions played a major role in determining this successful foreign policy outcome for the United States. Second, however, in terms of Iran's patronage of proxy groups and militias throughout the Middle East, sanctions have had essentially no effect in deterring these activities, as Iran continues to gain influence and counter US objectives in the region. In this essay, I will examine these paradoxical outcomes in greater depth and analyze why sanctions contributed to success in the case of Iran's nuclear program, while they were unable to do so in the case of Iranian support for regional terror groups.

First, the paper will discuss the context leading up to the 2016 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which demonstrated how sanctions were able to contribute to a nexus of incentives to produce a favorable outcome for US foreign policy interests. Then, the analysis will turn to Iran's sponsoring of regional proxies and why sanctions were unable to produce a similarly favorable outcomes for the US. The essay concludes with a synthesis of these divergent results and a coherent explanation of the logic governing such sanctioning activities.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Before examining the US sanctions on Iran in particular, it is necessary to analyze the relevant existing literature regarding the utility and effectiveness of economic sanctions.

At their core, economic sanctions are coercive mechanisms utilized in interstate conflict, and imposed by an aggrieved state in order to accomplish its foreign policy objectives. While the goals of sanctions can vary, their essential purpose is to restore a state of normalcy in interstate relations by preventing a target state from engaging in aggrieving activities. Scholar Court Golumbic and his co-author Robert Ruff describe this process as: “the deliberate withdrawal of normal economic relations between a sanctioning governmental body and a target country, government, entity, or individual in order to coerce the target to modify its behavior in a manner consistent with the sanctioning body’s foreign policy objectives.”⁶ Therefore, economic sanctions are characterized by their departure from “normal” relations between two states, with the intention of instituting a negative incentive for undesired action. Kern Alexander, a professor at the University of Illinois, expands upon this definition, arguing that economic sanctions should primarily be viewed as “corrective measures” for a perceived injustice or shirking of obligation from sanctioned state to sanctioning state. Further, he argues that sanctions are primarily intended to “remedy inequity and re-establish fairness” in relations between states. Thus, the success of sanctions should be determined primarily by their ability to restore the status quo ante between the sanctioning and sanctioned parties.⁷

In addition to their role as coercive mechanisms, sanctions function simultaneously as a means of communication, characterizing the activity of a sanctioned state as contrary to international norms or the interests of a particular state, and identifying a course of action that would be sufficient for sanctions relief. This alternative role of sanctions is described by Alexander in *Economic Sanctions*: “A state’s decision to impose sanctions may be motivated by the objective of defining the content of a norm, the breach of which justifies imposing the sanction.”⁸ As a result, the means of analyzing the utility of sanctions is twofold, as described by United Nations scholar Helmut Volger in *The Concise Encyclopedia of the United Nations*: “[Sanctions] are meant to demonstrate to the respective state the disapproval of the international community and to change, through their coercive pressure, its peace-endangering behavior. At the same time,

⁶ Court E. Golumbic; Robert S. III Ruff, “Who Do I Call for an EU Sanctions Exemption”, 2013. 1009.

⁷ Kern Alexander, “Economic Sanctions Law and Public Policy”, 2009. 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

there is a preventive effect: the target state – as well as others – is to be deterred from further incriminating acts.”⁹ Therefore, the scope of economic sanctions is larger, from an international relations perspective, than simply deterring one state’s particular course of action. Instead, the communicative role of sanctions extends beyond the sanctioned state, and is intended to discourage further states from engaging in similar peace-endangering action.

Further, sanctions can play an important role in deterring military conflict in fraught geo-political confrontations, since they impact the status quo without direct military engagement. As research scientist Daniel McCormack and his co-author, IE University professor Henry Pascoe describe, sanctions can be utilized against an adversary’s military, in order to “offset adverse shifts in relative power,” and thus impact the military calculus of a sanctioned state.¹⁰ While sanctions must be sufficiently destructive to a target’s military power in order to achieve certain benefits, sanctions should seek to underwrite peace between states, adding to the utility of sanctions in particularly fraught international conflicts.

From the United States perspective in particular, sanctions carry particular weight due to the unique role of the United States as an international superpower and financial center of the international community. As a result, the US government possesses particularly great power to assert its economic and security interests through sanctioning, a tendency described by Alexander in *Economic Sanctions*. In effect, Alexander argues that the US government is able, due to international reliance on the US dollar and financial system, as well as its considerable “military might,” to exert “a particular type of hegemony,” or strategic dominance of another state, by parlaying this influence into multilateral economic sanctioning regimes.¹¹ This framework replaces typical political calculus in target nations by imposing a reversed system of incentives, thereby attaching negative economic incentives to activities deemed counter to US interests, and providing relief for desired behavior.

REVIEW OF PAST ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

US sanctions against Iran have been in place since the 1979 Iranian Revolution when President Jimmy Carter responded to the Iranian hostage

⁹ Helmut Volger, “A Concise Encyclopedia of the United Nations”, 2010. 623-627.

¹⁰ Daniel McCormack and Henry Pascoe, “Sanctions and Preventive War”, 2015. 1713.

¹¹ Kern Alexander, “Economic Sanctions Law and Public Policy”, 2009. 51.

crisis, which saw the capture and detainment of American diplomats in the American embassy in Tehran. President Carter did so with an executive order seizing Iranian property in the US.¹² Since then, a litany of measures have gone into effect sanctioning various Iranian businesses, individuals, military entities, and the government as a whole, constituting a patchwork of sanctioning activities administered by both the executive and legislative branches of the US government.¹³ In addition to these US-based sanctions, the EU and UN both have implemented robust sanctioning regimes since 2006, which have contributed to Iran's increased isolation in conjunction with additional US sanctions prior to the 2016 JCPOA nuclear agreement.¹⁴ Between 1979 and 2005, the United States issued a variety of sanctions in response to various Iranian transgressions of international norms and military activities, which had important effects in setting the foundation for more robust future sanctioning efforts. These foundational sanctions included the addition of Iran to the Designated State Sponsors of Terror list in 1983, triggering a host of related sanctions, as well as the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996, which limited investment in Iran's energy sector.¹⁵ In addition, a series of executive orders prevented all American investment in and business with Iran.¹⁶

Following the breakdown of talks between the EU and the government of Iran upon Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election to the Iranian presidency in 2005, the EU and UN imposed a series of sanctions on Iranian ability to develop nuclear and ballistic missiles. These sanctions had the effect of cutting Iran off completely from the international financial system. These efforts were imposed in conjunction with sanctions of increased severity and scope imposed by the United States, including the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act of 2010, which sanctioned Iran's gasoline industry and any financial institutions connected to Iran's nuclear development program or support of regional terrorism.¹⁷ In addition, a series of executive orders over this period strengthened restrictions on Iran's energy sector, as well as increasing provisions for preventing

¹² "Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables", 2015. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Iranian workarounds through money-laundering and sanction evasion. Thus, by the time of the JCPOA agreement in 2016, Iran had borne the brunt of a strong international sanctioning effort, crippling both its economy and its ability to engage with the international community economically and diplomatically.

NUCLEAR PROGRAM: OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES, AND REASONS

First, it is important to consider the United States' foreign policy objectives behind sanctioning activities targeting Iran's nuclear development program. Since the Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act of 1992, the United States has sought to prevent Iran from creating a weapon of mass destruction through economic sanctions on its nuclear development program, as well as various sanctions intended to prevent Iranian capacity to procure the necessary materials to produce a nuclear weapon.¹⁸ This concern is reflected in the bill's text, which prevents any transfer of goods to Iran, "wherever there is reason to believe that such transfer could contribute to that country's acquiring chemical, biological, nuclear, or advanced conventional weapons."¹⁹ However, U.S. concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program have continued, as demonstrated by the text of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act of 2010. In the bill's preamble, Iran's nuclear program is still referred to as the central concern of an expanded sanctions regime, classifying Iran's nuclear program as a "serious and urgent" threat, and stating that the United States would "do everything possible—diplomatically, politically, and economically—to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability."²⁰ Thus, it is evident that Iran's nuclear program has remained at the forefront of United States foreign policy objectives in regards to Iran,

With regard to Iran's nuclear program, the United States' sanctioning activities have played a prominent role in paving the way for a meaningful and comprehensive stalling of nuclear development. The sanctioning regime, pieced together through various US unilateral sanctions, EU sanctions, and UN Security Council Resolutions, was intended to cut off all ability for the Iranian government to produce a nuclear bomb, through material constraints on its nuclear development infrastructure and financial constraints on all mechanisms within Iran that could

¹⁸ "Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables", 2015. 3.

¹⁹ Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act of 1992

²⁰ Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act of 2010

fund its nuclear development program. However, this achievement did not come until the majority of this sanctions regime was waived, in exchange for Iranian nuclear concessions in the form of the 2016 JCPOA., negotiated between Iran and a US-led international coalition, known as the “P5+1.”²¹

Specifically, as Harvard University scholar Dr. Gary Samore notes, the provisions of the JCPOA prevent Iran from producing fissile material for any nuclear weapons, at all of its declared nuclear facilities, for at least ten to fifteen years.²² This constraint significantly limits the Iranian nuclear program through multifaceted constraints on various means of nuclear weapons production, including the enrichment of plutonium and uranium. Before the JCPOA, had the capacity to enrich both of these materials to levels necessary for weaponization.²³ These physical limits on Iran’s nuclear development program are the most significant pieces of the agreement, as they provide robust ability to address any known ways of Iranian nuclear development for the entire fifteen year course of the deal. In addition, the JCPOA addressed the possibility of Iranian development of a nuclear weapon in covert facilities, albeit with some logistical restrictions due to the covert nature of these development sites.

In effect, the JCPOA provides for a robust international monitoring regime, in which Iran is subject to repeated checks by international monitoring services on its nuclear infrastructure, for the duration of the agreement.²⁴ This monitoring regime effectively discourages Iran from engaging in covert development activities, or pursuing nuclear development outside of the allowed limits on production of fissile material by increasing the likelihood that any attempted development in covert facilities would be detected by international monitors. Also important to note in the JCPOA is the ability for the US and its coalition partners in the JCPOA to pursue whatever course of action is deemed necessary if any of these conditions is violated, including the possibility of a military strike to Iran’s vulnerable nuclear facilities.²⁵ In sum, these measures largely prevent Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon over the fifteen year period, at which point if Iran has complied successfully, the deal’s provisions will be

²¹ P5+1 refers to the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, and Russia.

²² Gary Samore et. al., “The Iran Nuclear Deal - A Definitive Guide”, 2015. 7.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

“sunsetted,” or phased out.

Simultaneously, the JCPOA provides significant economic incentives for the Iranian government, enabled by the robust international sanctioning regime that preceded the agreement. Upon completion of Iran’s nuclear commitments, all UN sanctions on Iranian nuclear development are lifted according to the provisions of the deal. In addition, the most damaging of the EU and US sanctions on Iran’s financial and energy sectors will be lifted with the promise of more comprehensive sanctions relief on “Transition Day,” or after Iran has complied with the deal for eight years.²⁶ This relief from sanctions, while complicated particularly from the US perspective due to the patchwork nature and overlapping authorities of the US sanctions, offers important economic incentives for a regime that has been severely limited by intense sanctioning activity in the past. Indeed, *The Iran Nuclear Deal - A Definitive Guide* argues that “foreign investors are lining up as Iran begins laying the groundwork for economic reintegration,” demonstrating the perceived economic benefits for private companies eager to do business with Iran, given its need for foreign direct investment and involvement in international financial markets.²⁷

Further, as critics of the JCPOA would note, the US commitment to lift the most damaging of secondary sanctions for the first eight years of the deal relies upon repeated presidential certifications of Iranian compliance with the strictures of the nuclear deal. As a result, particularly in the face of bellicose statements on Iran from the recent US presidential administrations, many are concerned that this empowerment of the executive branch to undermine the JCPOA could carry severe implications on the legitimacy and long-term viability of the deal. Indeed, Brookings Institute scholars claim that the US president maintains the ability, under the auspices of U.S. domestic law as well as through the “snapback” provision present in the JCPOA, which allows for the US to unilaterally re-impose sanctions in response to Iranian non-performance of JCPOA commitments.²⁸ In addition, given the nature of the JCPOA as a non-binding international commitment, the US executive branch could simply retreat from the deal outside of the framework of the JCPOA.

However, abuses of power by the executive branch would likely carry

²⁶ Gary Samore et. al., “The Iran Nuclear Deal - A Definitive Guide”, 2015. 58.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁸ Lawfare. “Can President-Elect Trump “Dismantle” the JCPOA? It’s Complicated.”

damaging consequences, both in undoing the painstaking diplomatic progress required to formulate the agreement, as well as undermining the primary US foreign policy goal of a denuclearized Iran. Further, unilateral retreat from the JCPOA on the part of the United States would endanger the multilateral coalition of sanctions that preexisted the nuclear deal, ostensibly reducing the “bite” of such sanctions were the United States unable to mobilize the same coalition of European states to retreat from the deal as well. Therefore, not only would the United States lose the benefit of hard-earned leverage afforded by the JCPOA in inspecting and monitoring the Iranian nuclear program, but it would also face the likely consequence of a weakened sanctioning regime unable to sufficiently deter Iranian nuclear capability and development. In sum, while critics may argue that the threat of unilateral withdrawal weakens the effectiveness of the JCPOA, US presidential administrations would likely be deterred from such action by the various negative consequences.

Thus, when considering the impact of the US and international sanctioning regime with regard to US concern for Iran’s nuclear program, the sanctions were largely effective, in that they precipitated the JCPOA — the most meaningful international agreement regarding Iran’s nuclear program since the failed 2003 EU negotiations. The JCPOA has provided an important opening in US-Iran relations, and has the potential to transform a zero-sum game between the two states into a mutually-beneficial agreement. The deal rewards Iran both economically and diplomatically for comportment with international laws and treaties on nuclear non-proliferation, and allows for a recalibration of interests within Iran favoring engagement with the West over pursuit of an isolation economy. However, the decision of Iran to enter nuclear talks, and agree to the conditions of the JCPOA, was by no means a foregone conclusion due to economic hardship or imminent regime collapse within Iran. Rather, the sanctions sufficiently adjusted the internal domestic calculus of policymakers within Iran, encouraging them to pursue engagement in accordance with pre-existing domestic political trends. Specifically, the sanctions operated in conjunction with domestic economic and political opportunities within Iran in order to make a nuclear concession an attractive course of action for the Iranian government. As a result, the US sanctions were able to achieve their intended results with regard to the Iranian nuclear program through the signing of the JCPOA. However, The future of this deal remains predicated upon the ability of

the US and international community to continue providing sufficient incentives for Iran to decline to develop a nuclear weapon.

With regard to these economic incentives, economic mismanagement under the rule of the theocratic left political faction under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad contributed to a recalibration of economic interests within Iran in the years prior to the JCPOA with rampant inflation and other economic hardships, causing Iranians to become disenchanted with the current regime. In his work, Stanford University professor Abbas Milani claims that the policies of former Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, were “disastrous” and “ill-conceived,” both with regard to “basic fundamental choices about basic social and economic organization,” as well as his advocacy of the poor through redistributive economic policies.²⁹ According to Milani, Ahmadinejad’s government contributed greatly to economic hardship and discontent in Iran over his tenure, having “spent the entire windfall revenue from oil price increases” and “depleted the currency fund set up to protect the government when the price of oil falls.”³⁰ These policies have been coupled with equally damaging diplomatic missteps, as what Milani calls Ahmadinejad’s “willful insolence,” and contempt for engagement with Western powers, having contributed to Iran’s increased isolation on the scale of international diplomacy.³¹ It is thus no wonder why Ahmadinejad was swept aside in a landslide election by an unprecedented factional coalescence electing Rouhani.

Harvard University professor Dr. Payam Mohseni argues that sanctions and the damaged reputation of the theocratic faction’s ability to rule during Ahmadinejad’s tenure contributed to a coalescence of values to more pro-West and pro-engagement policies.³² Indeed, Mohseni argues that public disagreement with Ahmadinejad’s policies, “bolstered the growing alliance and similarity in positions” among integrationist camps in Iran. Such public condemnation allowed for convergence among political elites on foreign policy positions as well as economic positions.³³ As a result, economic and diplomatic isolationism became a less appealing political position within Iranian domestic politics, and Iranian political operatives capitalized on this growing public convergence through

²⁹ Abbas Milani, “Pious Populist”, 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Payam Mohseni, “The 2016 Iran Parliamentary Elections”, 2016. 13.

³³ Ibid., 13.

increased willingness to engage with the United States, in order to reap previously unavailable economic rewards.

Further, Mohseni argues that this convergence of interests has the potential to offer distinct political rewards from the perspective of domestic Iranian politics to those who engage in productive engagement with the West, particularly the United States. Through the moderate Iranian president Rouhani, Mohseni argues that Iranian politicians “are playing a nuanced game,” attempting to gain access to global markets and diplomatic benefits through engagement with the West in the form of the JCPOA nuclear deal, “all while key tenets of Iranian foreign and revolutionary policy remain in place.”³⁴ This “nuanced game” emphasizes the degree to which Iranian incentives are shaped to a large degree by internal cost-benefit analyses of political benefit and an increase in ability to pursue key objectives domestically. In effect, this agreement constitutes an effort by Iranian policymakers to capitalize on a domestic and political moment of convergence, facilitated both by the Ahmadinejad regime and the ability of the JCPOA to offer distinct fiscal benefits to an Iran willing to negotiate, thus allowing for tangible reward and credibility to be attributed to Rouhani’s regime. However, this strategy is inherently tenuous because the cost-benefit analysis of Iranian politicians is contingent upon the ability of this agreement to deliver tangible economic rewards in exchange for nuclear concessions. Mohseni affirms this characteristic, arguing that “the strength of Rouhani’s hand and his ability to deliver economically will be the most fundamental determinant of how the future politics of the coalition proceeds.”³⁵ Thus, the efficacy and long-term success of the current factional alignment within Iranian politics towards greater engagement and negotiation with the West is predicated upon an uncertain “determinant”: the economic rewards provided by a lifting of sanctions, which would signal to the Iranian populace that negotiation with the West can produce tangible rewards and would encourage further efforts in other contentious areas of Iranian policy making.

Supplementing the aforementioned internal political calculus is the economic landscape of Iran, which could reap great financial benefit by opening to foreign direct investment and the global financial market. Despite having

³⁴ Payam Mohseni, “The 2016 Iran Parliamentary Elections”, 2016. 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

lived in a heavily sanctioned and isolated state, Iran's populace is young, educated, and eager to engage with Western commodities through increased access facilitated by lifted international sanctions. Indeed, one expert considers Iran a "treasure island" with regard to its untapped financial market, and has been called the "number one market in the Middle East" by a large margin in terms of video game consumption.³⁶ In addition, faster internet speeds in Iran, coupled with the fact that "over half of Iran's 80 million population has access to a smartphone," bodes well for Western video game and technology companies investing in Iran.³⁷ Further, Iran's populace is well-positioned to take advantage of such increased foreign involvement and economic openings, as "Iran has no shortage of skilled software engineers or artists," due to the nation's high level of youth and education. Thus, there exist tangible economic benefits for increased engagement between the West and Iran, with the potential for the JCPOA to usher in a mutually beneficial financial engagement.

However, by no means was this agreement forced, as the economic crisis in Iran was hardly existential, even considering many of the misguided policies proposed by Ahmadinejad. Under the Ahmadinejad administration, the Iranian government undertook significant additions to social welfare policies in order to address the populace's economic concerns. While social justice and welfare had long characterized the Iranian post-revolutionary state, the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the empowering of the theocratic left faction of Iran in 2005 made justice and redistributive policies a central concern of his administration and used such endeavors to consolidate public support for his rule. Dr. Payam Mohseni argues that "[t]he electoral victory of Ahmadinejad accordingly tilted the regime toward the theocratic left, reemphasizing the slogans of social justice and revolutionary values."³⁸ Further, these policies were enacted in significant ways, both during Ahmadinejad's tenure and that of his successor, President Hassan Rouhani. One such endeavor was the establishment of the Basic Insurance Fund, which sought to provide universal health coverage for Iranian citizens in 2011.³⁹ This plan was made more robust by Rouhani in 2014, who made notable

³⁶ Vit Sisler, "Digital Heroes: Video Games and Identity Construction in Iranian Video Games", 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Payam Mohseni, "Factionalism, Privatization, and the Political Economy of Regime Transformation.", 2016. 57.

³⁹ Ibid.

additions— increasing coverage and registering uninsured individuals.⁴⁰ Kevan Harris takes this observation further in *Social Welfare Policies and the Dynamics of Elite and Popular Contention*, noting that Iran’s social welfare sector has performed incredibly well, given its context under sanctions: “The government has maintained a generous system of subsidies for food, medicine, and fuel at huge cost – about 10% of the GDP – that benefits the poor as well as the non-poor ... The impact of these programs on the poor in terms of more education, better health, and lower fertility has been dramatic.”⁴¹ In effect, despite its context of incredibly heavy sanctions and isolated economy, Iran has been able to develop an expansive and effective social welfare apparatus which has performed exceptionally over time, given the Iranian government’s commitment to such redistributive policies and care for the poor. This internal ability to manage economically as an isolated and sanctioned state underscores the degree to which US and international sanctioning efforts only constituted one part of a nexus of incentives for the Iranian government to engage in discussions regarding its nuclear program.

IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL PROXIES: OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES, AND REASONS

The second defining concern of US foreign policy objectives has been the desire to end Iran’s sponsoring of regional proxy groups. This component of Iranian foreign policy has been particularly salient in US-Iran relations, due to Iran’s utilization of foreign proxy groups and militias throughout the Middle East to exercise influence over regional affairs and counter US hegemony in the region. This patronage relationship extends throughout significant theaters for international conflict in the Middle East, including Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, all of which feature heavy involvement by Iran-backed militias or political groups.⁴² These patronage relationships facilitated by Iran include financial support for proxy group activities as well as strategic military and ideological training, facilitated primarily by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, a state military entity

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kevan Harris, “Social Welfare Policies and the Dynamics of Elite and Popular Contention”, 2016. 7.

⁴² Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, “Iran’s Axis of Resistance Rises”, 2017. 3.

parallel to the conventional army.⁴³ Thus, Iran's patronage for regional proxy groups carries important stakes for Western interests in the Middle East.

This fear of patronage for international terror organizations has played a significant role in the imposition of US sanctioning activities since the Islamic Revolution, most clearly demonstrated in various Executive Orders which sought to cut off Iran's regional terrorism activities, as well as in the text of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act of 2010 that sought to cut off funding to the IRGC, which orchestrates Iranian sponsoring of external proxies. This concern is reflected in the bill's preamble, which states: "The illicit nuclear activities of the Government of Iran, combined with its development of unconventional weapons and ballistic missiles and its support for international terrorism, represent a threat to the security of the United States."⁴⁴ As emphasized by this preambular clause, Iranian sponsorship activities throughout the region are perceived by the United States as a significant threat to regional stability, as well as to Western security interests in the Middle East.

Despite the various attempts by sanctioning regimes to stop these activities, Iran's regional patronage activities continue to have a significant impact in major theaters of international conflict throughout the Middle East today, underscoring the degree to which Iran's sponsorship of international proxies continues to impact Western interests in the Middle East. Indeed, a 2013 Congressional Research Service report indicated that "sanctions do not appear to have materially reduced Iran's capability to finance and provide arms to militant movements in the Middle East,"⁴⁵ indicating that Iran continues to exert its influence throughout the Middle East despite the sanctions regime imposed on it pre-JCPOA. This impact is demonstrated by the Iranian involvement in three defining international conflicts in the contemporary Middle East: Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, Iran's patronage of the Popular Mobilization Forces militias which overthrew ISIS in Iraq, and Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

First, Iran continues to play a significant role in Syria's Civil War through its support of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which is fighting to maintain power against an increasingly fractured rebel insurgency. Specifically, Iran has supported President Assad's regime since the Syrian opposition's initial 2011 uprisings and

⁴³ "Iran's Revolutionary Guards." 2013.

⁴⁴ Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act of 2010

⁴⁵ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran Sanctions", 2013. 51.

has gradually increased its role in the Syrian Civil War.⁴⁶ This support has consisted not only of diplomatic support for President Assad's government and direct military support and weapons provision, but also the recruitment of foreign fighters to protect Assad's regime.⁴⁷ This support aims to preserve Syria's institutions and the "status quo ante," in line with the IRGC's motive of fostering an "axis of resistance" throughout the Middle East, in order to protect Iranian national security and its regional interests from Western efforts to undermine.⁴⁸ Further, Iran has been critical in funding and mobilizing a broad coalition of "pro-regime foreign fighters" throughout the Middle East, including Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, precisely the international sponsoring of terrorism that US sanctions were intended to deter.⁴⁹ The dichotomy between US interests in Syria and those of Iran are clear in this case as well. While, as the BBC reported in 2015, the United States has provided limited funding for "moderate" oppositional militias in Syria, Iran's patronage has funded opposing interests, providing critical support for the Assad regime in the face of Western consternation.⁵⁰

Second, following the collapse of Iraq's military in 2014, Iranian-backed militias have become integrated into Iraq's state security apparatus and Iranian interests have gained significant influence in the Iraqi government. This has occurred under the auspices of the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF, which are essentially a loose and decentralized grouping of Iran-sponsored Shiite militias operating in Iraq.⁵¹ Since Iraq's legislative branch formally incorporated the PMF into Iraq's military in 2016, these Iranian-backed militias have played a significant role in key governmental challenges within Iraq, securing land on behalf of the Iranian government during a recent Kurdish bid for independence, and forming a crucial part of the US-led coalition that expelled ISIS from its

⁴⁶ Aniseh Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict", 2016. 3.

⁴⁷ Aniseh Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict", 2016. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Ilan Berman, "Nuclear Deal Fallout: The Global Threat of Iran", 2017. 10. In the citation, indicate that this is a congressional testimony.

⁵⁰ "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand", 2015.

⁵¹ "Iraq parliament passes law legalising PMF Shia militias.", 2016.

Mosul stronghold.⁵² These efforts are particularly significant, given the role of Iraq as a key stage for US regional and security interests. Council of Foreign Relations Fellow Ray Takeyh argues that Iran has utilized the disorder in Iraq created by the 2003 US invasion and toppling of Iraq's secular Ba'athist regime in order to "project its power" and make "further inroads" in Iraq, thereby fostering a weak client state friendly to Iranian interests.⁵³

Finally, Iran maintains strong ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, which offers it intimate connection with and influence in the actions of one of Lebanon's most significant political and military players. Middle East Research and Information Project scholar Lara Deeb, in *Hizballah: A Primer*, notes that Iran helped to foster Hezbollah's nascent movement since the 1980s, in the wake of Israeli occupation and attacks on Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War. Deeb describes the dynamics of this patronage relationship, noting that Iran has helped to train and arm the militia since the 1980s and continues to provide it with military aid and limited access to rockets and arms, while Hezbollah has grown to be a prominent political movement and provider of social welfare services within Lebanon.⁵⁴ In addition, Deeb writes that Hezbollah regularly consults with Iranian leaders and publicly considers Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to be its "marja," or spiritual leader.⁵⁵ Roschanack Shaery in *Iran, the Vatican of Shiism?* adds that, at the behest of Iranian funding, Hezbollah is also able to provide a "network of social services" within Lebanon, which "has earned it a major role as an advocate for the disadvantaged Shi'i population."⁵⁶ Thus, through Iranian patronage and support, Hezbollah has developed into a legitimate and major player within the Lebanese state, affording Iran a powerful partner in achieving its regional interests. This relationship is particularly significant in underscoring Iran's ability to underwrite interests counter to the United States through extraterritorial patronage, given Hezbollah's expressed desire for the destruction of Israel, a US partner and ally in the region.

Given the significant Iranian role in many of the Middle East's defining conflicts, sponsoring terrorist groups and regional proxies often counter to Western

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ray Takeyh, "The Nuclear Deal Fallout: The Global Threat of Iran", 2017. 3. Indicate that this is a testimony to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs?

⁵⁴ Lara Deeb, "Hizballah: A Primer", 2006.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Roschanack Shaery, "Iran, the Vatican of Shi'ism?", 2004.

interests throughout the region, it is evident that the various sanctions intended to cut off Iran's role as a state sponsor of external proxies have not succeeded. Why, then, have sanctions been able to play a role in achieving US interests with regard to Iran's nuclear program, yet have not been able to do so with regard to Iran's support of terrorism? Because (1) Iran's foreign policy strategy was born out of a unique mix of Iranian financial constraints due to its sanctioned context, (2) its acute sense of national insecurity, and (3) the desire of the IRGC and Supreme Leader Khamenei to "export the revolution" ideologically – thus, sanctioning serves only to deepen and entrench these foundational incentivizing forces, rather than providing incentives for an alternative course of action.

First, the material constraints on Iran's economy due to sanctions have played an important role in incentivizing the regime's support of regional proxies. Through the crippling sanctions regimes imposed by the United States, EU, and UN between 1979 and 2016, which completely prohibited engagement with Iran's financial and energy sectors, as well as the blacklisting of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's foreign policy has been forced to operate on a paltry budget in comparison to its regional neighbors.⁵⁷ Further, stringent financial sanctions specifically targeted the ability of Iran to build up a conventional military. For example, due to the 1984 State Sponsor of Terror designation imposed by the US, as well as subsequent unilateral Arms Non-Proliferation Acts and a 2007 UN Security Council Resolution, Iran's ability to acquire conventional weapons systems and deal in arms has been severely limited by sanctioning restrictions.⁵⁸

Second, Iran is acutely conscious of perceived threats to its national security, particularly by the United States, through both the threat of direct invasion as well as the utilization of Western allies in the region. University of South Florida professor Mohsen Milani corroborates this profound sense of insecurity with regard to the threat of the US pursuing regime change, arguing that "Tehran's top priority is the survival of the Islamic Republic as it exists now," in the face of Tehran's view of the United States as an "existential threat." Indeed, Milani argues that Iran's foreign policy is largely shaped by this perception of existential threat from the US, and thus much of Iran's foreign policy decisions

⁵⁷ "Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables", 2015. 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

can be read through this lens of threat perception.⁵⁹ This fundamental insecurity is further reflected by the makeup of Iran's military forces, particularly in the Persian Gulf, described by Anthony Cordesman in *Iran, Oil, and the Strait of Hormuz*. Cordesman notes that Iran has built up an array of unconventional weaponry and forces in the Gulf, including civilian ships and light arms, in preparation for the contingency of "asymmetric war" in the region. Further, Cordesman, referencing Israeli military intelligence, characterizes the Iranian regime as revealing a "defensive mindset with an intention to deter against an attack," further reflecting the Iranian fear of invasion from its Gulf neighbors, as well as by an "asymmetric" force such as the United States.⁶⁰ Thus, it is evident that Iran possesses an acute awareness of its own vulnerability to attack, both from the United States and from its militarily superior regional neighbors and competitors.

Third, Iran's hardline faction remains committed to "exporting" the revolutionary ideals of the Islamic Revolution, through intervention in foreign contexts and support of foreign proxies. This process, as described by Naval Postgraduate School professor Afshon Ostovar, is primarily inspired by Iran's desire to preserve its own revolution, through collaboration with "like-minded armed groups" in order to deter against foreign antagonism. As Ostovar describes, this belief in exporting the revolution forms the "ideological and moral bases" for Iranian involvement in foreign countries, thereby creating an important impetus for Iranian foreign policy to continue to pursue this course of action.⁶¹ Further, as Farideh Farhi and Saideh Lotfian argue in *Iran's Post-Revolution Foreign Policy Puzzle*, post-revolutionary Iran has viewed its role in the region as "global in scope", and has been intimately concerned with changing the perceived "hierarchical world order" characterized by Western hegemony in the region; a view that was formalized into the Iranian Constitution as well.⁶² Thus, there exists a significant ideological impetus for the exportation of the Islamic Revolution, and support for regional proxy groups that share Iran's revolutionary ideals.

Given these three fundamental pressures shaping Iranian foreign policy, it is no surprise that sanctions have been unable to impact the regime's foreign

⁵⁹ Mohsen Milani, "Tehran's Take: Understanding Iran's US Policy", 2009.

⁶⁰ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran, Oil, and the Strait of Hormuz", 2017. 5.

⁶¹ Afshon Ostovar, "Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards", 2016. 104.

⁶² Farideh Farhi and Saideh Lotfian, "Iran's Post-Revolution Foreign Policy Puzzle", 2012. 6.

policy calculus in concordance with Western interests. Indeed, Iran's foreign policy of "revolutionary internationalism," given Iran's context as a sanctioned regime, serves as a calculated maximization of Iran's interests under these three fundamental incentivizing forces. First, with regard to the fiscal constraints imposed by sanctioning, revolutionary internationalism and patronage of friendly foreign proxies serves as a cost-effective and potent foreign policy strategy for Iran. According to Council of Foreign Relations Fellow Ray Takeyh 2017 statement to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Iran spends between 3.5 and 16 billion dollars annually, or between 0.9 and 4 percent of GDP on its support of foreign proxies.⁶³ In comparison to US allies in the region and neighboring antagonistic states Saudi Arabia (7.98% GDP) and Israel (5.69% GDP),⁶⁴ Iran is accomplishing the same foreign policy goals at a much lower price tag than these states. Further, it is evident that Iran's foreign policy strategy is able to accomplish significant elements of Iran's foreign policy objectives despite the reduced price tag. As General Joseph L. Votel testified to the US Senate Armed Services Committee in 2017, Iran's financing of foreign elements and the expansion of its "malign influence" throughout significant conflict zones in the Middle East pose "the greatest long-term threat to US interests" in the region.⁶⁵ Given Iran's expressed goals of countering US containment of its influence in the region, it is clear that Iran's low-cost, high-effectiveness foreign policy strategy is accomplishing its goals of pursuing regional hegemony thus far.

Second, given United States attempts to contain and isolate Iran's regional influence, revolutionary internationalism affords Iran an unparalleled ability to pursue its interests abroad and counter the perceived threat of isolation by the United States. Dr. Payam Mohseni affirms the utility of revolutionary internationalism in *Axis of Resistance*, arguing that regional geopolitical crises in the Middle East offer Iran a solution to the "existential" threat of the United States and its regional partners,⁶⁶ as Iran is able to take advantage of crisis-induced power vacuums and extend its regional hegemony. General Votel corroborates this interpretation of Iranian strategy, arguing that Iran primarily operates within the "gray zone", where instability and threat can be exploited to

⁶³ Ray Takeyh, "The Nuclear Deal Fallout: The Global Threat of Iran", 2017. 11.

⁶⁴ "Country Comparison: Military Expenditures", 2012.

⁶⁵ General Joseph L. Votel, "The Posture of U.S. Central Command", 2017. 28.

⁶⁶ Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises", 2017. 7.

comport with Iranian foreign policy interests. This tendency has culminated in an expansive sphere of influence throughout prominent regional stages of conflict, as General Votel testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee this March: “[Iran’s] forces and proxies oppose U.S. interests in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria, and seek to hinder achievement of U.S. objectives”.⁶⁷ Given this ability to influence events in a variety of regional conflicts important to US interests, Iran’s role as a regional hegemon can be understood as intentional destabilization, undermining US interests in conflicts in order to prevent its own destruction by a unified force of the United States and its regional allies.

Finally, Iran’s patronage of regional proxies, both ideologically and financially, offers it an increased capacity to insert its ideological agenda across the region, accomplishing the goal of domestic hardliners to “export the revolution” across the Middle East. Specifically, through its involvement with regional proxies, Iran is able to ensure that its revolutionary rhetoric and ideology spreads throughout the Middle East, cementing its role as both a geostrategic and ideological regional hegemon. This process of ideological insertion throughout the Middle East is most clearly evidenced by Iran’s intimate relation to foreign proxy Hezbollah, which Deeb argues has resulted in Hezbollah’s official statement of religious emulation of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁶⁸ This emulation carries significant consequences in the on-the-ground realities of Hezbollah and Iran’s influence throughout the region, as evidenced by Tabrizi’s description of Hezbollah as “an appendage of the revolutionary aspect of the Iranian regime,” thus demonstrating the degree to which Iranian revolutionary ideals can tangibly influence the actions of their proxies.⁶⁹ As a result, Iran’s ideological influence becomes “tantamount to control” for its foreign proxies, resulting in an increased ability for Iran to alter the course of events and assert regional hegemony in its immediate surroundings.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

In summary, while sanctions played a significant role in accomplishing US foreign policy objectives with regard to Iran’s nuclear program, viewing sanctions

⁶⁷ General Joseph L. Votel, “The Posture of U.S. Central Command”, 2017. 27.

⁶⁸ Lara Deeb, “Hizballah: A Primer”, 2006.

⁶⁹ Aniseh Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict”, 2016. 28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

as the only reason for Iranian concordance with US objectives is reductive and ignores the tenuous balance of domestic politics within Iran that allowed for the landmark JCPOA agreement in 2016. This limited efficacy of sanctioning activity is further demonstrated by the inability of coercive sanctions to force Iran into compliance with US foreign policy objectives regarding Iran's support of foreign proxy groups in the Middle East. These divergent outcomes suggest that US sanctioning policy should take into greater account the internal domestic institutions and trends in countries targeted by sanctions rather than imposing debilitating one-size-fits-all economic sanctions without regard for the domestic context of the target nation. In other words, economic sanctions should not be used as a universal solution to a wide range of diplomatic issues. Thus, in the case of Iran, sanctioning regimes functioned in a somewhat paradoxical manner, incentivizing behavior in concordance with US interests with respect to the Iranian nuclear development program, while simultaneously producing conditions incentivizing destabilizing behavior with respect to Iranian foreign policy. As a result, while economic sanctions can be useful tools of diplomacy, their utility should be viewed as a means of influencing a nexus of incentives, used to shift domestic calculus to incentivize concordance with US foreign policy interests. Policymakers should remain aware of domestic political and economic trends within target countries, in order to ensure that sanctions will not result in serious and unintended consequences, and to maximize the effectiveness of sanctioning regimes.

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